Analysis: How Much States Spend on Their Kids Really Does Matter

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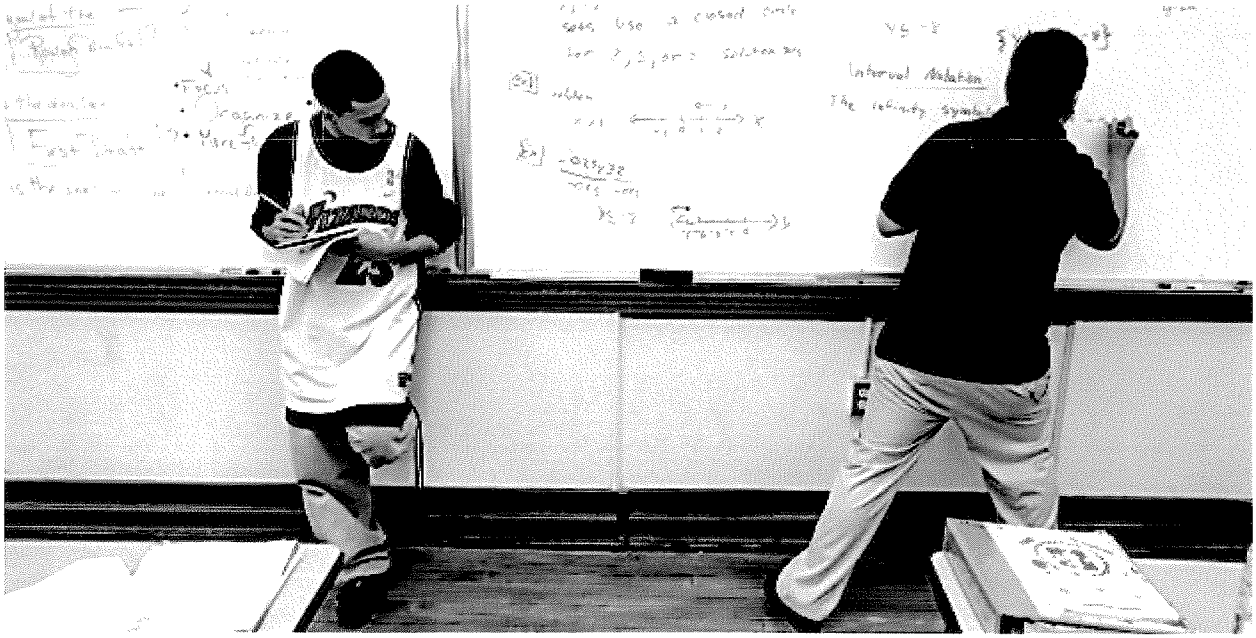

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Top-ranked Massachusetts spends an average of $13,361 per pupil, which is the 11th-most among all states.

The initial difference between state education rankings and the average per-pupil spending is clear and rather obvious: States that spend more on their students tend to rank higher, and states that spend less rank lower. But if the answer were that simple, education reform would be a breeze.

So like every complex story, outliers and exceptions to the rule exist.

Take Colorado, for instance. The Centennial State ranks ninth nationally in quality of education but spent an average of $9,155 per student in 2009, putting it among the 10 states spending the least per pupil.

In comparison, Wyoming—ranked 29th in quality—spent the most of any state, averaging $18,068 per student. Alaska, ranked 41st for its education quality, spent an average of $16,174 per student. Overall, the U.S. spent an average of $11,665 per student.

But it's hard to ignore patterns that emerge. Success or so-called education-quality measurements generally are based on a formula of graduation rates, test results, and pre-K enrollment, among other factors. Of the top 10 states ranked highest for their education systems using 2009 data, four were among the nation's highest per-pupil spenders.

Highest Ranked			Least Spent Per Pupil		
Ranking	State	Spending	Spending	State	Ranking
1	Massachusetts	$ 13,361	$ 7,217	Utah	27
2	New Jersey	$ 15,116	$ 8,363	Nevada	50
3	Vermont	$ 17,847	$ 8,654	Texas	32
4	New Hampshire	$ 13,519	$ 8,655	Arizona	46
5	Connecticut	$ 13,959	$ 8,667	California	43
6	Maryland	$ 12,703	$ 8,695	Tennessee	42
7	Minnesota	$ 11,472	$ 8,840	Idaho	30
8	Pennsylvania	$ 12,906	$ 9,024	North Carolina	25
9	Colorado	$ 9,155	$ 9,155	Colorado	9
10	Wisconsin	$ 11,783	$ 9,329	Washington	26

Lowest Ranked			Most Spent Per Pupil		
41	Alaska	$ 16,174	$ 13,519	New Hampshire	4
42	Tennessee	$ 8,695	$ 13,773	Montana	13
43	California	$ 8,667	$ 13,959	Connecticut	5
44	Alabama	$ 10,320	$ 14,567	Rhode Island	20
45	Louisiana	$ 12,253	$ 14,591	Maine	23
46	Arizona	$ 8,655	$ 15,116	New Jersey	2
47	West Virginia	$ 12,780	$ 15,863	New York	19
48	Mississippi	$ 9,708	$ 16,174	Alaska	41
49	New Mexico	$ 11,001	$ 17,847	Vermont	3
50	Nevada	$ 8,363	$ 18,068	Wyoming	29

On the other end of the spectrum, states that spent the least per student in 2009 were ranked fairly low on education. Nevada, ranked lowest at 50, spent just an average of $8,363 on each student and is second-to-last in spending. Utah, ranked 27th, claims the lowest spending at an average of $7,217 per student.

The data comes from the 2012 Kids Count Data Book, a report released annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which evaluates nationwide trends in child well-being by education, economics, health, and community factors.

The education rankings are calculated from several outcome-based indicators, including pre-K enrollment rates, reading and math proficiency scores from fourth grade and eighth grade, as well as high school graduation rates.

Ranked No. 1 in quality is Massachusetts, which spent an average of $13,361 per pupil. The Bay State was barely edged from the top 10 most expensive states by its neighbor, New Hampshire, which spent an average of $13,519 and ranks No. 4 nationally.

Northwestern states arguably spent the most per student, while states in the South spent less. The national education rankings also notably appear to inversely mirror the map of spending. Some of the lowest-ranked states flank the southern U.S. border, while the highest-ranked states are concentrated in the Northwest.